

# דברי יעקב יוסף

## The Words of Yaakov Yosef

Published on the Occasion of Joel Belson's 80th Birthday  
March 6, 2013





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# Introduction

Set forth herein are the talks you have given at CSJ and Hillcrest. These talks teach us about prayer, the *Tanach*, services, ritual. But most importantly, they teach us about you - as a professor and student; a husband, father, and grandfather; a child and grandchild; a man of both unflappable reason and profound faith. You make clear that faith has grounded you. In so doing, you explain how you have grounded each of us.

A recurrent message you convey is that the world is God's world. Both in these talks and in your daily life, you show us that His world is immensely beautiful because you are part of it.

With tremendous gratitude for all you do and who you are,  
Your loving children and grandchildren





## On Daily Prayer

Conservative Synagogue of Jamaica, May 1, 1993

One Saturday last summer, Marty Werber asked us as a congregation to consider whether or not we wish to continue our (almost) daily prayer services – the *minyan*. I thought, therefore, that some account of the experience Abby and I have had attending daily prayer services, so far at twelve different congregations, might be of interest to you while thinking about this subject.

On June 8, 1992, Abby's father died. At that time, she decided to undertake the traditional obligation of saying *Kaddish* each day for 11 months, even though that obligation is not traditionally required of women. She did attend daily prayer services for this period, and I chose to attend them also.

Both Abby and I have had some Jewish education and some experience of attending Sabbath and holiday services. We know enough to be beginners, and it may be, therefore, that, for those of you who have not participated in daily prayer and services regularly – or at all – our point of view, that of outsiders and newcomers, will be helpful to you as a supplement to the point of view of those for whom daily prayer is simply what one does, a continuing and ordinary part of life.

The most important things to know about daily prayer are, first, it is important. It matters. It is a privilege and a blessing. It is one of the things that defines us as human beings, and one of the things that helps us to understand the world. Second, anyone should expect to be made welcome at any *minyan*, Conservative or Orthodox, that he or she chooses to attend whenever he or she chooses to attend it.

How much does daily prayer matter to those who choose to make it part of their lives? One way to know just how much is to read some of the accounts of the bitterness the Jewish feminists felt at being excluded from daily prayer. (These are accounts of the practices of 30 or 40 years ago and are not directly relevant to the experiences Abby and I

have had this year.) Another way is to consider the speculation made by Rabbi Aizenberg while discussing daily prayer with us. He said that when the rabbis in ancient times devised the daily ritual we now follow, it probably did not occur to them that most Jews in a later time would not find prayer an ordinary part of life, would not, in fact, choose to pray every day. It probably did not occur to them that it might be difficult, 1600 years afterward, to obtain with ease and regularity at least twice each day a quorum, a *minyan*, of at least 10 men over the age of 13 who could be understood to represent the whole of the community of which they were a part. A member of our own *minyan* told us that, during his childhood in Europe, daily prayer was not a problem or a curiosity. It was, simply, what people did. In other words, to live was to pray.

How much does daily prayer matter to some American Jews living in the 1990s? Last summer, Abby and I spent nine days in Montauk, Long Island. The nearest daily *minyan* was an hour's ride away in Patchogue. About 9:30 pm on a Tuesday night of that July period, we learned that Young Israel of Patchogue would not hold its daily evening *minyan* on Wednesday. To attend Wednesday morning *minyan* at Young Israel would have meant being on the road by 5:00 a.m. after having had little more than five hours sleep. That schedule seemed more than flesh should bear. On Wednesday morning, we discovered that there is a Conservative congregation in Patchogue less than a mile away from the Orthodox. They meet, as we do, Monday, Thursday, and Sunday mornings and, of course, for full Sabbath observance. Never on Wednesdays. Never, except Fridays and Saturdays, at night. Abby spoke to the president of the congregation at his business office and told him that we were traveling and that she wished to say *Kaddish*. He offered to gather a *minyan* on Wednesday evening for us for the purpose. To reach Patchogue that night we traveled through a heavy rain storm. At five minutes to eight, we followed another *minyan* attender through the rain and through the one open door. Inside were a dozen Jews. Ten members of the Conservative Synagogue of Patchogue had come out in a storm to make it possible for someone they had never seen before and were not likely ever to see again to say *Kaddish*. We were warmly welcomed.

Daily prayer is important. It matters.

After we had made the decision to attend, our first question to ourselves was: Would it be possible for us to do so? Our own congregation does not have a daily prayer service.

Abby can, at times, be quite literal minded. Daily means every day.

What about Tuesday and Wednesday? And what about the nine days of which I spoke that we wished to spend in Montauk?

Our second question was: Would it be possible for both of us to do so? Would every *minyan* welcome the presence of a woman?

The quorum, the *minyan*, is traditionally completed by 10 adult Jewish males. I made several phone calls and, to be brief, both of us have been warmly welcomed by seven Conservative congregations, two Young Israel congregations, and two other Orthodox congregations, one in Westhampton Beach, the other in Manhattan. We were happy to discover that women do occasionally attend our own *minyan*, often attend that *minyan* at Hillcrest, and regularly attend at Hollis Hills and the East 55th Street Conservative Synagogue.

Attending daily prayer, that is, attending every single day without fail, is no casual undertaking. It requires fitting one's entire schedule to the meeting time of the *minyan*. Neither the needs of work, nor the need for sleep, nor the whims of the weather provide excuse of absence. Daily means every day.

If the work day is long, and *minyan* is at 4:15, one can attend *Shacharit* at 6:00, 7:00, or 7:30 in the morning or *Maariv* at 5:45, 7:30, 9:15, or 10:00 at night – to name only the meeting times of which we are now aware.

If the work day or the family day is long, and *Shacharit* must be our choice, sleep may be short. We have gone to *Shacharit* with little sleep – but never, so far, without at least some breakfast. If the social or family schedule is complex, that schedule must be worked around the *minyan* schedule. There is no other way around. Attending twice in one day does not make up for one day with no attendance at all.

It was clear to me even as Abby and I began this experience that, whether one member of a family attends or two or more, daily prayer is a family commitment. It would be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for one member of a family to attend if another were hostile to the idea. It would be difficult for one member to attend if another simply failed to make the activity a natural part of daily life.

Again, to be present every day at the *minyan*, the *minyan* schedule must be kept first, not our work schedule, not our meal schedule, not our social schedule, not the weather or

almost any personal or family consideration.

If you wish to be one of those for whom prayer is one of the principal privileges of life, you must calculate.

Do you need to travel on business? Find the nearest synagogue that has daily prayer before you book your hotel.

Are you hungry after work? Is the family waiting for dinner? You will have to arrange to eat before the *minyan* or after it.

Are you planning to go out in the evening with friends? Choose a day when you will attend *Shacharit* – if praying once a day will satisfy you. Otherwise, find a *minyan* that meets early in the evening.

Is everything wrong at home? Doesn't the family need you more at home than the *minyan* needs you in *shul*? Go! This thing you will do selfishly. The *minyan* doesn't need you in *shul*. You need to be there.

There are some minor problems associated with *minyan* attendance, too. For example, when does it meet? Posted notices are not always correct. A synagogue telephone is sometimes answered by machine, and the machine's recording may well not have the information you want. A synagogue telephone is sometimes answered by a person, and the person may well not have the information you want. Call the rabbi, or the cantor, or the president. They know. They will tell you.

Will you join me in a *minyan* visit?

What should we wear? I have seen all styles from jackets and ties to polo shirts, from long skirts to mini skirts. At CSJ, in the winter, my advice is to dress warm.

Whom will we meet? People of all ages. The *minyan* in our own synagogue is older and more male than some others, but even here, people of all ages is correct.

How long will it take? About 40 minutes in the morning, about 25 in the evening.

What will we hear? Almost anything we can imagine. Some services are quite formal. At these, the *davening* is done principally by the leader, and prayers are both in Hebrew and in English. Voices are disciplined and restrained. The portions chanted are beautifully performed. Other services are sheer babble. There is, except during the *Amidah*, a great volume of undisciplined sound. We experienced both extremes of sound at Conservative congregations. Ordinarily, we hear some chanting by the leader, some

responses by the *minyan*, and long periods of semi-audible sounds.

How do we follow and participate? If we are recognized as novices, the leader or another member of the *minyan* will announce the starting page and those pages on which new beginnings are made, that is, the pages where reading begins after a significant portion of the printed text has been omitted. Other than that, we are on our own. The only exception Abby and I have so far found to this practice is the service of the Park Avenue Synagogue, which conducts its *minyan* service in much the same manner that it, and CSJ, conduct Sabbath and holiday services.

If you remember that I said that participation in the *minyan* service is a blessing and a privilege, and if you even a little bit believed me, you might still ask fairly: If I am not fully guided, will I be able to participate without extensive study? Yes. You will.

In order to find your way, you will have to learn the very minimum amount about the structure of our liturgy, its principal prayers, the *Ashrei*, the *Shma*, the *Borchu*, the *Amidah*, the *Alenu*, the *Kaddish*. And you will have to ask, before or after the service, the page numbers you need to know. If you go to the same synagogue and use the same book daily, you will soon know the page on which the service begins, the pages that are omitted, the page on which the *Amidah* begins, and the rest. If, like Abby and me, you are itinerant and go from *shul* to *shul*, you must rely on your knowledge of the structure of the service to guide you. The books are different, so the pages are different. But the prayers are the same.

Even when you know the page, you may ask, where are we on the page? The pace of every *minyan* service is faster than the pace of normal speech, faster than the pace of normal reading; it seems, in fact, at times, to be faster than the pace of normal thought. For a while, I was not sure that I could read English at the rate at which an accomplished *minyan* leader can read the Hebrew of *Shacharit*, *Mincha*, or *Maariv*. It was only a few weeks ago that, looking for a passage in a long article to read to Abby, I read aloud some parts of the article at a rate so rapid that Abby said, “Slow down. I can’t understand you.” I am not certain I can repeat the performance. But the speed is often *minyan* speed. How close have I come to *minyan* speed after daily attendance for almost a year? I am barely a paragraph closer to finishing the *Amidah* at the same time as the leader than I was when I started.

But I do know where we are on the page. I have learned to follow. I seldom get lost and am never now lost for more than a few seconds. Again, it is knowledge of structure that

makes following possible, not just the structure of the service itself, but the structure of the presentation. The reader will chant the first phrase and last line or two – or three – of each paragraph. If you go to the same synagogue and listen to the same leaders daily, you will soon know which phrases and lines are chanted and which are slurred over. If, like Abby and me, you are itinerant and go from *shul* to *shul*, you will gradually learn to follow different *davening* styles.

Early in this experience, a question I put to myself was: Why is the ritual conducted in this manner? Why is it read so rapidly that it becomes a formula which one with best effort and attention can barely repeat, much less think about while the service is going on?

The answers I made to myself were these:

1. Prayer and study are two separate activities. The best time for study is not at a service. The form and the meaning of the prayers must be dealt with outside the chapel. They must be because there is no way in which one can deal with them in the chapel.

2. The effectiveness of prayer for one who prays does not depend on his or her knowing the meaning of the prayer but on the fact of prayer itself.

As a result of thinking about daily prayer, I realized that I have only become curious about the meaning of the liturgy as a result of having it made meaningless by the speed at which it is recited at the *minyan*. In the past, my enjoyment of Sabbath and holiday services was the enjoyment of repeating the formulas that joined me with my own past, the formulas that recalled to me praying with members of my family and memories of my childhood when I led a children's service, the formulas which also reinforced my sense of identity with the Jewish people. I never cared what they meant before. The familiar sounds of the chant put me at ease, made me feel at home.

Most prayer books which print English translations print, instead of a translation, a transliteration for at least one of the printings of the Mourner's *Kaddish*. This is done, undoubtedly, so that a mourner who knows no Hebrew can pronounce the *Kaddish* in Hebrew sounds if he or she wishes to do so. But the translation of the *Kaddish*, for many people, may very well not matter. One who recites *Kaddish* asserts and praises the glory of God and asks peace and life for self and for the community as a whole. In the act of praying, one is refreshed whether one is conscious of the meaning of the words of praise and request or not. During the moment when the words are sincerely uttered, the request

for peace is likely to be granted. The moment after may be, of course, very different.

I am not indifferent to the meaning of words, and I am one who is much dependent on translations. During Sabbath and holiday services, I uniformly make the time given to the chanting of the Torah and Haftarah portions a time of study. I seldom follow the Hebrew text. I usually read the English text and the notes. Nor have I disregarded, except during the service itself, the meaning of the liturgy.

Since the liturgy is now much in my thoughts, I have begun to read it in English and to think about what it means. To me, it asserts first and most powerfully that this is God's world not ours.

*Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all things.*

Day and night are not the result of the accidents we call the laws of nature. The earth does not rotate by chance but by design, God's design. The harmonious operations of nature do not exist because we discover them. We discover them because they have already been created that way.

Mind, the power we possess of which we should be most proud, is God's gift to us.

*Blessed art thou, Lord, who bestows the gracious gift of knowledge.*

Our ability to think was not stolen from God, or developed by chance in spite of God, but is given us because of God.

Like the Bible, which is its principal source, the liturgy also asserts that God can be understood in many ways. He is the creator, the giver of all gifts, and the bringer of peace. He is also *ish milchama*. Each morning, *minyans* the world over stand and sing the song of triumph the Israelites sang over Pharaoh's drowned army:

*The Lord is a man of war.*

*The Lord is his name.*

What I said at the outset was that daily prayer is a privilege and a blessing. It helps us to understand the world. It helps us to define ourselves as human beings. It is one way of allowing us to express what is best in us.

*That I might sing Thy praise and not be silent.*

\* \* \*







## D'var Torah Toldot

Conservative Synagogue of Jamaica, November 13, 1999

The Torah passage that we read today tells the story of a couple, Isaac and Rebecca, and their two boys, Esau and Jacob.

In some ways, these are ordinary people with ordinary problems. How extraordinary, after all, could people who live in tents be? Even our more immediate ancestors, who lived in cold water flats on Avenue A, were a step up from tents. But, in fact, Isaac and Rebecca and Esau and Jacob weren't ordinary people at all. They held high social position; they had great wealth. Three of them thought of themselves as living in the Divine Presence. They genuinely believed that God was aware of them, near them, cared about what they did, how they lived, and what they suffered. Their experience of God's direct concern for them makes them heroic characters, not just extraordinary ones.

In the Torah passages we have been reading recently and will be reading soon, the expression of God's concern for those human beings who have the grace to be aware of Him often takes the form of a blessing. Many of the blessings are prophetic in nature. They tell of posterity, of great nations to come. All of them, all the blessings - every one - imposes a burden that only the heroic can bear.

Let's begin with Isaac and Rebecca. They are people with both problems and joys. Many of their problems seem to be the problems of ordinary people, not extraordinary or heroic ones.

Immediately after her marriage, Rebecca cannot conceive. When she does, she has a difficult pregnancy and delivery. The twins to whom she gives birth quarrel with each other from infancy onwards.

The parents have favorites, and each parent favors a different child.

Isaac has financial difficulties as a result of a famine in the land and has to relocate the family.

Esau, the older son, marries out of the faith, twice for love and the third time to do spite to his parents because they had made plain to him how much his earlier marriages hurt them.

The younger son, Jacob, so antagonizes his older brother, Esau, that Jacob has to leave home for fear that Esau will kill him.

The couple do not live to enjoy the reconciliation of their children.

Isaac and Rebecca have joys, too, and, like their problems, many of their joys seem to be the joys of ordinary people, not extraordinary or heroic ones.

Although their marriage is arranged, the couple fall genuinely in love.

They enjoy each other's company. They play. They laugh.

The name Isaac means laughter.

They enjoy food and sex.

*Avimelekh, King of the Philistines, looked out a window and saw: There was Yitzhak laughing and loving with Rivka, his wife. (Genesis 26:8)*

Despite difficulties in conception, they do have children.

Despite her subservient position, Rebecca does manage to get what she wants: a husband from within the family for herself; a bride, actually brides, from within the family for her favorite son, Jacob; the father's blessing for her favorite, and younger, son. Despite some reversals, Isaac becomes a wealthy and powerful man. An ordinary life. No. Theirs was not an ordinary life at all. They and their children were founders of nations to come and leaders of their tribes during their own lifetimes. They created wealth, earned respect and envy, demonstrated intellectual and physical strength. They lived to great age. They made themselves a prominent part of the history of the world.

Such lives are not ordinary.

One thing more - an important thing - the most important thing. Isaac and Rebecca were conscious of the presence of God. And Jacob, like his grandfather, Abraham, had visions of God participating directly in the events of his own life; at Beth-El and again before his reconciliation with Esau, visions which are as rare - as extraordinary - in those days as they are in ours.

Lives lived with the consciousness of the Divine Presence are not just extraordinary, they are heroic.

Many modern people tend to believe that people who are conscious of the presence of God in their lives are not heroic but demented. I, however, would join George Bernard Shaw in proposing that the test of sanity in such instances is in the result, in the behavior that results from the vision. Rebecca has a vision. In the midst of her pregnancy, Rebecca cries out in pain. There is no medicine, no surgery available for her, only screams.

*If this be so,  
why do I exist?*

She goes to inquire of God, and is granted this:

*God said to her  
Two nations are in your body  
Two tribes from your belly shall be divided;  
Tribe shall be mightier than tribe  
Elder shall be servant to the younger. (Genesis 25:22-23)*

What is the result of her vision? She continues to exist: not because God gave her a pill to relieve the pain, but because He gave her a reason to bear it. She had the inspiration to conceive that there was a purpose to her life that made her life worth the pain.

Is there a saner way to endure?

Jacob has a vision too. Jacob prepares himself psychologically for reunion with his brother, Esau, by wrestling with an angel in the hours before the reunion takes place.

Years earlier, Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright and stolen Esau's parental blessing and fled to Syria to escape the real possibility that Esau might have murdered him in an uncontrollable vengeful rage. In Syria, he married - twice - and connived to enrich himself at his father-in-law's, Laban's, expense. Fleeing Laban, as he fled Esau earlier, he returned to the land of Canaan where he must meet Esau once more.

And he wrestled with the angel that night, and overcame him, and secured a blessing.

The blessing: a name change - be no longer Jacob but Israel. Be no longer the child who came out of the womb clutching his brother's heel and thus naming himself. Jacob means heel gripper, supplanter. Be no longer the child who, under his mother's direction, steals the gifts he couldn't fight for. Now he can fight. Now, after the wrestling, Israel, God fighter, for he fought with God and prevailed.

Now, after his struggle, Jacob sees himself as a strong adult, ready to meet his brother, beg his forgiveness, and accept, if necessary, his punishment.

Jacob has the inspiration to reconceive himself, to transform himself, with God's help, into a new person, capable of meeting Esau, who, as it turns out, will be kind to him.

That was the result of Jacob's vision.

Was there a saner way to make it possible for him to survive and endure?

Why is it that the lives of the greatest men and women in our tradition were so filled with pain? Shouldn't heroic lives, blessed lives, sane lives lived with the consciousness of the presence of God be lives of joy, of peace? The fact is that they aren't.

Another of Jacob's blessings was his posterity, and his posterity caused him great pain, especially the pain he endured because of his love for his son Joseph.

Delmore Schwartz, a 20th century author, wrote a short story about his own parents' lives, which he entitled, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." That title might well have been used for an account of Jacob's life. But Schwartz actually did write directly about Jacob's life in a poem about Jacob's love for Joseph.

As many of you remember, Joseph was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons, and his favorite. To show his love for Joseph, Jacob gave Joseph a remarkable coat, a coat of many colors. The coat and the love it represented made Joseph the object of his siblings' envy and hatred. In consequence, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, took his coat, tore it, dipped it in animal blood, and told Jacob that his darling boy had been devoured by wild beasts. What follows are the words Delmore Schwartz puts into Jacob's mouth.

*What should I desire?*

*Not to have loved my son, the best of sons?*

*Should I have hidden / My love for him?*

*Or should he have concealed / the self I loved above all  
others / by wearing the coat which is customary, the coat his brothers wore?*

*How can the heart know love, and not love the more?  
Love is unjust.  
Justice is loveless.*

Toward the end of his life, in Pharaoh's court, when the king of Egypt asks him to speak, Jacob says:

*Few and evil have been the days and years of my life. (Genesis 47:9)*

How could the blessed Jacob, blessed by Isaac, blessed by God, how could he say that?  
How could he not? It was the plain truth, as he saw it, felt it, lived it. The Lord gave him blessing, not peace.

What could Isaac have said had he been prompted to comment on his life as Jacob was?

At the approach to Mount Moriah, his father, Abraham, told the servants, "We will worship and we will return to you." Abraham could not have known *surely* that *two* would return. On Mount Moriah, Abraham saw the angel. Isaac saw the knife. For the most part after that, Isaac saw little. When Rebecca arrived, he looked up and saw the camels. She looked up and saw him. At the long end of his life, he was nearly blind.

What sustained him? What allowed him, largely unseeing, enduring trials, not experiencing peace, to transmit a vision to a new generation and ultimately, to us? He could transmit a vision because he had a vision.

*Now the Lord was seen by him on that night and said,  
"I am the God of Abraham your father.  
Do not be afraid, for I am with you." (Genesis 26:24)*

Such was Isaac's blessing: "I am with you." It was enough.

It had to be enough. It was what he was given. And, for the patriarchs and

matriarchs, for truly heroic people, such a blessing is enough.

For the rest of us? Many people, more ordinary than Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob, would like blessing to bring peace and joy, more urgent needs than promixity to God. Certainly we pray for peace often enough, at every service in fact. *Sim Shalom*. Lord, grant peace. It's the title of our daily prayer book. Will we, unheroic people, who want so much less than Abraham and Jacob wanted, be granted joy? Peace? The history of humanity suggests that we can't count on that happening.

What blessing and vision did bring our heroic ancestors, in addition to a sense of the proximity of God, were strength to endure; the conviction that human beings are not alone in an empty universe; the conviction that what happens to us has meaning and purpose; the conviction that our lives matter.

That strength, those convictions, can be ours to share if we wish. They are our inheritance.

The intense desire, Jacob's desire for God's direct blessing, for vision, that desire is rare. To struggle, as Jacob did with his brother, Esau, with his father, Isaac, and with God Himself to get the vision and the blessing at the risk of curses and death, that is the struggle of a heroic life.

One more poem, again about Jacob, and I am done. This by Richard Beer-Hofmann:

*Because he (Jacob) moves forever shadowed by deep questioning  
And you (Esau) rejoice, happy and safe and sated  
Because he does not shroud his God in distant heavens,  
But wrestles with him daily, heart to heart!  
Because you can but hunt, make offering ...  
He bears the blessing - and the blessing's burden.  
(Torah, Reformed, page 239 RBH Jacob's Dream, pp. 60-61)*

In Jacob's achievement, his heroic choice of the burden of blessing, we, too, are blessed.

\* \* \*







## On the Ten Commandments

Hillcrest Jewish Center, February 18, 2006

Several months ago, Rabbi Fine asked if one of us would like to present a *dvar Torah*. I volunteered.

I believe that the common custom of having a congregant deliver a *dvar Torah* is a good one. And I hope others of you will want to speak as I am now if an opportunity to do so is presented to us.

As both Jewish and secular traditions tell us, there is likely to be increased understanding of ideas when we talk to each other about ideas to which we are all trying to respond intelligently.

It was our privilege this morning to hear chanted, once again, the passage of the Torah containing the Ten Commandments.

I am going to talk to you about one characteristic of the Ten Commandments as a whole, and then, specifically, about the first Commandment, which concerns faith in God, and the fourth Commandment, which concerns the Sabbath.

The Ten Commandments are a set of statements that, our tradition tells us, are true today and true forever. They are open to questions about what they mean but certainly not to questions about whether they might be false or out of date.

At the beginning of every Torah service, we are quite clear about the matters of truth and relevance. We address “the God of the universe, the God of truth, whose Torah is truth.” And we also assert that the statements of the Torah are not open to question about whether they might be relevant to our contemporary world.

The Commandments were not given for one generation but for all generations. We are told directly that God will show “kindness to the thousandth generation” of those who love Him and keep His Commandments. In our liturgy, every day and every Sabbath, we say:

*Your teaching is true and enduring.  
Your words are established forever.*

On *Shabbat*, we sing:

*V'shomru b'nai Yisroel ...*

“The people of Israel shall observe *Shabbat*, to maintain it as an everlasting covenant throughout all generations.” Not only then, but also now and always.

I taught Bible as literature for many years at the State University of New York Maritime College, and for most of those years, my students responded to the Ten Commandments in a rather matter-of-fact way. They disregarded the first verses, the ones about God; they were uncertain about the meaning of Sabbath. The weekend, as my students understood the matter, is for sports, shopping, and partying. But they did understand clearly the intent of the fifth Commandment.

*Honor your father and your mother ...  
that you may long endure upon the land.*

They thought that if they respected their parents then their own children might respect them. They hoped that if they took care of their parents in old age then their own children might care for them in old age.

And as far as the last five Commandments were concerned, they thought the Bible was right.

In the case of these last five, even one of the most secular of the last century's intellectuals, Sigmund Freud, also thought the Bible was right.

In his book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud argued that the price of civilization is the renunciation of the instincts. By the instincts, Freud meant an individual's impulse to satisfy any need he or she has without regard to the needs of anyone else.

But to live together, we must agree not to do each other violence. The Torah passage we heard says simply:

*You shall not murder.*

To live together, we must agree not to take each other's possessions. The Torah passage we heard today says simply:

*You shall not steal.*

It came as a surprise to me, in the last years during which I taught, that my students had abandoned their predecessors' views. By the 1990's, my students had become relativists.

Of the Ten Commandments they said, literally: "That was then. This is now." Our commandments come from what our parents teach us now; what our peers teach us now; and what the media teach us now. People in other societies learn from their parents, peers, and media. There are societies, they said, which are indifferent to violence of any kind. There are societies, they said, which place no value on property. There are societies, they said, which live without belief in God and certainly without belief in the God who speaks to us in the Hebrew Bible.

The fact is, though, that as long as people continue to talk about the Commandments seriously, they endure as they have endured from generation to generation. The American poet, James Russell Lowell, put the matter this way:

*In vain we call old notions fudge  
And bend our conscience to our dealing;  
The Ten Commandments will not budge  
And stealing will continue stealing.*

One difficulty of claiming that moral statements are binding and meaningful forever is that people tend to disagree about what the statements really mean.

For example, how do we interpret a principal rule for Sabbath observance:

*You shall not do any work.*

The *Mishna* discussions of *Shabbos* begin with a consideration of acts of transporting objects from one domain to another and use as illustrations a beggar who thrusts his beggar's bowl inside a householder's window. Begging can be considered work. Feeding a beggar can be considered work. But is this the work the fourth Commandment prohibits?

Suppose we grant that the full meaning of any rule is unclear and that people continue to disagree about how to apply rules. What happens when we say, as my students did, that since we have no way of knowing what is absolutely right, we can, in all cases, do just as we please?

In fact, whatever we say, we always act as if some things are absolutely right - or wrong.

I tried to demonstrate to my students that, despite their claims that there were no absolute values, they themselves really did have values they believed in and standards that they felt must not ever be broken.

The SUNY Maritime College tries to promote military values. So, I offered to my students the following: Suppose, I said, you worked for U.S. Naval Intelligence and an agent from a foreign country offered you a large amount of money to provide him with the Navy's secret communication code. If nothing is truly right or wrong, would you have any reason not to accept the money and transmit the information?

My students literally screamed at me: "But that's treason!" I had forced them to admit that there was at least one behavior they considered absolutely wrong.

Whatever the difficulties in agreeing on and interpreting a standard of right and wrong behavior, people don't live together successfully without creating such a standard. Even in a world which proclaims that anything goes, for each individual, each group, each society, there are acts which are just not done. And, there are acts which must be done.

In the Torah, the Ten Commandments are called *aseret ha divrot*, the ten statements, the Decalogue. Of the ten, I would ask you, this morning, to think especially about two:

The very first: "*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt ...*

*You shall have no other gods besides Me;*" and

The fourth: "*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.*"

Why does a code of moral behavior start with a requirement that the listener make a confession of faith?

One answer is that God is the guarantor that the statements that follow are true and eternal. Other ancient nations had legal codes which contained elements of the code given at Sinai, but the guarantor of the legal codes of the other nations was always a king. Kings' laws may or may not embody truth. They certainly do not last forever.

Again, why begin with requiring a confession of faith?

Another answer is that faith is the most important behavior of all. Part of the rabbinic tradition argues that faith cannot be commanded. Maimonides thought that it could.

I am on Maimonides' side of the argument. The first line, "I am the Lord," can be cast in a command form: For instance, you are to know that I am the Lord. It is possible to read the text to mean that we are to know that faith is required of us and that, because faith is put first, faith is the behavior we should most want to practice.

The passage continues: "You shall have no other gods besides Me." Is the meaning of this statement the same as the meaning of the statement which follows - "You shall not make for yourselves a sculptured image?"

It is not the same.

My students were able to supply a line from the New Testament to help here. The line is "You cannot worship God and Mammon," that is, money. I can supply a few lines from our own tradition, specifically from the Book of Job.

Job is a man who lives his life without fault. He commits no sins. Yet God allows him to be physically tortured and to be punished by the loss of his children. Job pleads the case of his innocence before God and among the things he says are these:

*If I have made gold my hope,  
If I rejoiced because my wealth was great,  
If I beheld the sun when it shined or the moon walking in brightness  
And my heart has been secretly enticed  
Or my mouth has kissed my hand  
This also were an iniquity to be punished by the Judge*

*For I should have denied the God that is above. (Job 31:24-28)*

Human beings worship many gods besides the ones given sculptured form. Gold is one. The sun when it shines, the moon walking in brightness, that is, nature, and, by extension, science, is another. “If my mouth has kissed my hand,” says Job, “I should have denied the God that is above.” Human beings also worship themselves.

We listened, today, to what seemed to be a set of simple statements. They are not, of course, simple at all.

The other Commandment I am going to comment on is the Sabbath Commandment.

The Sabbath is the day we sanctify, set aside, by command of the God that is above.

When I was a small child, the element of the Sabbath Commandment which was most meaningful to me was the negative statement: “You shall not do any work - you, your son, your daughter...” I was the son, and the Sabbath was the day I could not do any of the things I liked to do. I could not listen to the radio. I could not cut, color, or write. I could not play cards. I could not understand it.

The list of what adults are asked not to do on the Sabbath is a longer one. But the Sabbath statement in the Decalogue is much more about what we should do than what we should not do.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Remember the work of creation, the foundation of the world.

Remember the going out from Egypt, the foundation of the nation.

How do we understand setting aside a whole day in a short week to remember how we were made as human beings and where, as a nation, we came from?

How do we understand setting aside a whole day in a short week for song, praise, and study?

We live in a city that boasts that it never sleeps. We live in a world that prides itself that its business is conducted 24/7. Make your purchases on-line at midnight. Pay your bills at 1:00 a.m. Get technical support from India at 2:00 a.m. Today. Every day. Why not



every day? Why rest, ever?

Although 24/7 is a modern phrase, the concept is ancient. The Roman writer, Seneca, thought the concept of a sabbath was absurd. “To spend every seventh day,” he said, “without doing anything means to lose a seventh part of life, besides suffering loss in pressing matters from such idleness.”

Yet, here we are, assembled once again in this synagogue on the seventh day, not suffering loss but gaining a sense of ourselves not available in any other way. We have come to offer praise, and, as the *Modim* prayer, the thanksgiving prayer in the *Amidah*, implies, we have come to thank God for granting us the grace to want to offer praise.

God does not require our praise. We require the opportunity to offer praise. Whenever we offer praise, we remind ourselves that we are a part of the work of creation and that we have a special relationship with the Creator. He has placed us just a little lower than the angels. Whenever we offer praise, we assure ourselves that we are capable of being morally responsible. God made us that way. We are not just biological machinery.

We cease from our labors. In doing so, we acknowledge the Commandment and affirm that it is reasonable to live as if some behaviors are truly right and others are truly wrong, even when we cannot perfectly define right and wrong. Our ideals give us direction. We approach the truth as nearly as we can.

We cease from our labors. In doing so, we acknowledge the Commandment and affirm that it is reasonable to live as if some standards of behavior have always been true, are now true, and will always be true for all people.

We cease from our labors, not to be idle or to reduce our enjoyment of life, but to be able to live our lives as completely as we can.

We cease from our labors to affirm that we understand what Deuteronomy tells us, that a covenant was made with us at Sinai. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made the covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today.

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## Why Read the Bible?

Hillcrest Jewish Center, April 5, 2006

When I taught the Bible as literature at SUNY Maritime College, one of my hardest tasks was to persuade my students to read it. Like Huckleberry Finn, they didn't take much stock in dead people. Besides, they had come to college to learn how to make a living - not how to live. And, oh yes, still another thing: They had read it all before. In Roman Catholic parish schools, in Protestant Sunday schools, occasionally, even in Hebrew school.

The first objection was the easiest to answer. I would ask my students to demonstrate by reference to their own lives the influence of the past, of Huck Finn's dead people, on the present, their present. Well, there were the American patriots who fought the revolution against England, drew up our Constitution, and gave us the United States. There were people like Pasteur and Lister and Marx and Freud and even Neil Armstrong and, okay, there were those people in the Bible who still help us to create modern religion and still help us to develop some sense of the Divine Presence in our lives.

On the matter of the proper focus of higher education, that is, whether the proper subject for mankind to study is man or manufacturing, we agreed to leave the matter open and await further developments.

It was the last point, their saying that they had read it all before, that gave the most trouble. I wanted my students to read the Bible, not just to come to class to listen to me talk about it. I wanted them to react to the text itself, not to my comments about it. I wanted them to experience the amazement, awe, fear, anger, confusion, and faith that the Bible stories can inspire. And, since I assigned principally the story sections of the text, I wanted them to discover that the Bible could be a good read.

Bible for children, which is what my students had read, is a fine thing - for children. It is not the Bible in itself.

Although we can print it in one large volume, our Bible is actually a library of books, more than 30 in all. *Tanach* is a short name for the Hebrew Bible, our Bible, as a whole. The first consonant stands for Torah, the second for *Naviim*, that is, the writings of the prophets, and the last for *Kasuvim*, a miscellaneous collection of writing that includes some of the finest literature ever set down.

What's in this 3,000 year-old library that would induce a cool, 21st century college student, or, in fact, anyone other than an antiquarian to read it?

What I said to my students is that they would find in the Hebrew Bible an account, not of the world as it was, but of the world as it is, honestly and simply told. As a people, ancient Israel is shown to be fearful, superstitious, and rebellious. Its great leaders save their people from their folly as often as from their foes. No topic is foreign to the Hebrew Bible. It discusses with equal candor sex, violence, disease, pain, longing, every human emotion and condition that 21st century imagination can conceive. No-one will ever read better history or a better novel than the account given of the life of David in First and Second Samuel or a better biography than the life of Joseph found in Genesis.

If you are entertained by violence, Jael driving the tent peg through Sisera's skull should do. Sex, try the story of Judah and Tamar, the father-in-law who slept with his daughter-in-law. If you want a moral story, whose morals are a lot less than obvious, try the story of Cain, on whom God places a mark, not of punishment, but of protection. If you think that the heroic characters of the Bible are going to be presented as having no flaws, think again. What are we to make of Abraham putting Sarah into Pharaoh's harem to save his own life? Or Jacob's continual practice of deceit? Or David's arranging for the death of the husband of Bathsheba so he could marry her? These are not Sunday school stories.

One of the things I hoped would happen when my students read these stories was that they would come to realize that the Bible tells the truth. It does not pretend.

Since the curriculum required my students to read the Bible, they read it to be entertained. I, their instructor, hoped they would also find out something about the Western literary tradition and the origins of Western civilization.

We read Bible for those things if we wish, but certainly, in this sanctuary, for other purposes.

During World War II, when I was a child, my mother and I had to live with my

grandparents for two years while my father served with the United States Army. One of the differences I observed between my grandparents' ways and my parents' was that my grandfather read the Bible for an hour every Sunday morning. Not because it was wartime. It was always wartime. He had not forgotten the pogroms. Not because he needed to fill time. He owned a large business. He always had work to do. He read the Bible because he understood that it was part of his obligation as a Jew. And, he did it because, as he did it, his effort was repaid, both by the inspiration he drew from it and, although he couldn't know it at the time, in the inspiration I drew from seeing him do it.

What are some of the reasons for us here today to read the Bible? Most important, we read the Bible to confirm our faith by learning about the lives of those who were most faithful. We also read the Bible to learn who our ancestors were and what their religious practices were, to learn where we are coming from. We read the Bible to affirm the continuity of our tradition and to find the relevance of the tradition to our own lives now. In finding the relevance, we find ourselves. We know who we are. And we read the Bible to gain the inspiration that will enable us to teach its values to our children and grandchildren. Our children may reject the teaching, but our goal is to teach. That is where we are going and as far as anyone can go.

The Bible tells us that we are, in the most literal as well as in the widest possible poetic sense, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At least three times a day, every day, at the beginning of the *Amidah*, we address the God of our ancestors. We mention them by name. *Elohenu v'Elohei Avotenu, Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzhak, Elohei Yaakov.*

We come from people who lived heroic lives. They were both military and civil leaders. They commanded families and armies. They defended their own lives and the lives of those who depended on them with wit, with strength of arms, with courage, and with something that made them remarkable then as it makes them remarkable still, with faith.

We are also the descendants of the brothers who left Joseph in a pit to die; the descendants of the people who made the golden calf while the mountain burned and smoked over their heads; the descendants of those who weren't brave enough to believe God's promise that the land from Akaba to the Galilee would be theirs. We are the descendants of those who heard the word of God and didn't believe it and those who were

present when it was spoken and didn't hear it. In Isaiah's words: "To them the word of the Lord was no more than mutter upon mutter/murmur upon murmur." (Isaiah 28:13).

Many of our ancestors were no different from most people, past or present. They looked at God's world and didn't or couldn't find God in it. But a few of our ancestors were different from most people. They were the ones who lived their lives conscious of the presence of God in the world, and they are the ones to whom we turn. From the account of those who could not believe we learn that the world hasn't changed very much. In an important sense, these people are really lost to our history, as they were lost to themselves. Only antiquarians care about whether they really existed. The archeologists can't find them.

The people the Bible talks about whose existence matters are those whose faith changed their own lives, and, potentially, the lives of everyone who learns about them.

When David, the king, brings up the ark to Jerusalem and dances before it ecstatically in the public street, he is showing us what it means to love the Lord with all one's heart and with all one's might. When Abraham intercedes with God on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom, he shows us something about our relationship to God and our responsibilities as human beings.

The Maritime College, where I taught, was run in a military fashion, somewhat similar to that used by Annapolis. Our president was always a retired U.S. Navy admiral. I would ask my students, "Would you go to the president of the college and ask him to go easy on a group of students he thought worthy of disciplining? Would you tell him how you think he ought to behave in a particular circumstance, trivial or serious?" Of course they wouldn't. In the 42 years I spent there, with the exception of the Vietnam years, when students would tell anybody anything, they never did. But here in Genesis, we find Abraham arguing, not with a retired admiral, but with God, not on behalf of a few students who had committed some minor infractions of the rules and regulations of the regiment of cadets, but on behalf of genuinely evil people. Abraham asked specifically that the guilty be spared so that those among them who were innocent would not be destroyed with them. He included in his appeal a challenge to God, which rings loudly down through the centuries to our own time: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25).

Abraham's actions show us simply, directly what it means to be fully a human being. He shows us that we have the right to ask of God: Shall not the Judge of all the world do

right? And the responsibility to do right to the extent that we can. In our tradition, that means, as the prophet Micah tells us, to try to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

What else do the lives of the greatest of the Biblical characters show us? For me, these things are the most important:

First: The great people of the Bible have not always been good people in all aspects of their lives. Jacob was devious, tricky; Moses, violent; David, selfish and vengeful. The Bible has not tried to tidy them up in neat, saintly packages. Their faults make them credible. Their faith makes them heroic, magnificent.

Second: These people have not had easy lives. Abraham was called to leave his home, to live among enemies, to live for decades with no child from his beloved Sarah, to be commanded to sacrifice the child she ultimately bore. Not easy. Jacob lived at odds with his brother, his father-in-law, and most important, his children. For many years, he lived in the belief that his favorite child had been torn to pieces by wild beasts. He ended his life in exile.

David suffered the grief of losing two sons, one an infant, the other, a young man. During his own youth, David was hunted by those who wished to kill him. Although he was loved by many loyal followers during his lifetime, he was often the victim of hatred and betrayal. This week, on the first two days of *Pesach*, as we chanted the 116th psalm in the *Hallel*, we heard him cry out in pain. Listen to him, David the King, God's anointed: "I am suffering greatly," he says, and he adds, "I [David] said in haste: 'All people lie'" about God's ability to save the wretched. This is not just a poetic expression. It is the expression of the anguish of his life.

I always told my students that the Bible tells the truth about life as it was lived in ancient times *and* about the way we live now. But there is also a difference between then and now. For my students I emphasized only the similarity. For us here in this sanctuary, I want to emphasize, not only the similarity, but also the difference. However much the heroic characters of the Bible share our common human experience, they are genuinely unlike us and unapproachable by us, because they could communicate to us a vision of the Divine so clear and so intense and with such effectiveness that we are still inspired by it thousands of years after their deaths. We have learned to believe as we do in large part

because they believed as they did. What they saw we cannot see. But for me, they are credible witnesses to the presence of God in the world because, in their ordinary human failings and in their sufferings, they have been so like us.

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## On Saying *Kaddish*

Hillcrest Jewish Center, Shavuot 2007

I am going to tell you, this morning, about the experiences Abby and I have had saying *Kaddish* for our parents, first what we did, then, what we learned about the consolation our religion can provide.

In 1984, at the age of 51, I became an orphan and began to say, on a weekly basis, the Orphan's *Kaddish*, which we more ordinarily call the Mourner's *Kaddish*. Being an orphan in the middle of life was not a role that I had prepared for or, in fact, even recognized before I filled it. I knew that my parents would die, and that I was likely to become, eventually, the oldest generation in my family. But what that really meant I had not wanted to think through and couldn't for a long time. At the time of my father's death, though, I did think that "orphan" was a strange word to apply to a 50-something. Twenty-three years later, after the deaths of three more parents, it seems far less strange.

In 1998, Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic* magazine, published a book titled, simply, *Kaddish*, about his responses to his father's death and about the meaning and practice of saying *Kaddish*. It is a brilliant book and certainly among the writings that may help at a time of loss. In the book, Mr. Wieseltier said that both his father and his religion expected him to say *Kaddish* and that these two reasons were sufficiently strong to induce him to do it three times a day for eleven months. Neither Abby nor I had ever seen anyone in our family do this, and neither of us even knew precisely what it would require of us.

What I remember most about the first *minyan* I attended after my father's death was that the room was cold and that some of the congregants used the interval between *Minchah* and *Maariv* to engage in spiteful gossip.

The next day, I was down with the flu. By the time I had recovered sufficiently to return to work and synagogue, I had decided that saying *Kaddish* every Saturday would be enough. And that is what I did, and I did the same when my mother died. The second time,

I didn't even try the weekday *minyan*. *Shabbos* would do.

I made a mistake. As one of the *minyan* members told me on another occasion, sometimes, it is useful to think of a congregation as if it were your family, even when you think they've behaved badly.

When Abby's father died, fifteen years ago today, she determined to say *Kaddish* once each day. I decided to attend the *minyan* services with her, in part, just to be present with her, in part, as a means of being, when necessary, the tenth man.

In our tradition, *Kaddish* can only be recited when a group of 10 adult worshippers is present. When Abby started her first period of mourning in 1992, in Jamaica Estates, that meant 10 males over the age of 13. Later, in Conservative congregations here, it meant, as you know, 10 adult worshippers without any gender qualification.

The first thing we discovered when Abby began to say *Kaddish* was that, in order to do it regularly, everything else in the day must be secondary to it. In 1992, we were both working. Mr. Wieseltier was also working. He had an immensely sophisticated job. At one point, he says, "My days have become pathologically busy." What was the consequence of that? He continues, "I have taken to coming to *[s]bul* early. I have escaped the brilliant world."

Abby arranged her day so that, whether she was going to work or to visit our children, she was always near a synagogue that had a *minyan* that met at a time when she could attend it. Actually, it was more complicated than that. Synagogues do not always gather 10 adult worshippers for a service, and, when that happens, *Kaddish* cannot be recited. But Abby was determined to say *Kaddish* every day. She needed, therefore, a backup *minyan*. In 1992, when she attended only one service a day, that was relatively easy to arrange. If she couldn't say *Kaddish* in the morning, she would go to a *Minchah-Maariv* service later.

That is, it was easy until we decided to spend a week in Montauk during the summer. Friday night and Saturday were easy. We attended the services at the Reformed Congregation in East Hampton. Sunday morning, we joined the *minyan* at the newly formed Orthodox synagogue in Westhampton. On Monday evening, we joined an Orthodox *minyan*, this time in Patchogue, about an hour's ride away. We thought the *Kaddish* schedule was in hand for the rest of the week. But it wasn't. The Orthodox *minyan* in Patchogue did not meet on Wednesday evenings. They told us that there was a Conservative synagogue in Patchogue but it had no *minyan* at all on Wednesdays. What to do? Abby was able to

reach the president of the Patchogue Conservative congregation and ask for his help. On Wednesday evening, after riding through a blinding rainstorm, we arrived with an emerging rainbow at the parking lot of the Patchogue Conservative Synagogue, and, following a father and teenaged son, made our way through a side door about two minutes before the appointed time. We found a small chapel with 10 men quietly awaiting our arrival. Abby said *Kaddish*. We have never forgotten that. We never will.

In 1992, we did not know how Orthodox or even Conservative congregations would react to a woman who wanted to say *Kaddish*. One of our Orthodox friends had been discouraged from saying *Kaddish* for her mother. Not quite forbidden, but discouraged strongly enough to cause her to abandon the idea. The author, Letty Pogrebin, who wanted to say *Kaddish* for her mother, was refused a place in the *minyan* by her father, a prominent member of a Conservative synagogue.

As it turned out, in 1992, Abby was welcomed everywhere. But she was counted for the quorum of 10 almost nowhere. Two synagogues did count her: one, the Sutton Place Conservative Synagogue, where the rabbi asked Abby if she would be comfortable saying *Kaddish* in a *minyan* where women were counted; the other, our own synagogue at the time, the Conservative Synagogue of Jamaica Estates, which was not yet egalitarian. Abby and I became regular members of the CSJE *minyan*. The *minyan* was led by the cantor. One crisp fall morning, he counted 10 people in all and announced, “We are 10 Jews. Let’s *daven*.” And that was the end of the gender issue at our old *shul*.

Thirteen years later, when her mother died, Abby decided to say *Kaddish* twice a day, except for those days when we were not in New York City or Westchester. On those days, only once. This time, we knew that she would be welcomed, and we knew that backup was possible.

*Shacharit* here at Hillcrest meets at 7:00 a.m.; at Young Israel on 188th Street, at 7:30. If we slept late, we could go to Young Israel on Jewel Avenue at 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. At the end of the day, we could find services from sundown to at least 9:45 in our area. We could attend a service at Jewel Avenue in any weather. We arrived there for *Minchab-Maariv*, one February afternoon, in a snowstorm, 10 minutes before the scheduled time. I made the eighth of a group of men who were muttering about the good old days when *minyans* were always filled. Within 15 minutes, 35 men and Abby were gathered to *daven*. Once, Hillcrest

had no *minyan* on Friday night. We went to Temple Israel, the Reformed congregation in our neighborhood, for their service at 8:00. We had *Shabbos* dinner late that night.

But leaving New York was still a problem.

We like to spend some time in Northwest Connecticut. Finding a *minyan* in Litchfield County can be a challenge. On Saturday and Sunday, we attended services in West Hartford, an hour away. But weekdays, where? Making a 6:45 a.m. *minyan* in West Hartford was a discouraging prospect. We went to Camp Ramah in Wingdale, New York. Every morning at 9:00, about two hundred teenagers gather in the open air with mountain views and conduct a *Shacharit* service entirely by themselves. Abby said *Kaddish*.

That was what we did.

This is what we learned:

The very hardest lesson, the lesson we are still trying to learn, is that death is the way it has to be. A line from the Greek poet Homer is continually present to me. It says that God, who knows no sorrow Himself, “has woven sorrow into the very pattern of our lives.” On the one hand, we have to accept that this is God’s world. What happens in it does not happen against His will. On the other hand, we cannot understand His will. Our own feelings are also beyond our understanding. There is a portion of the traditional funeral service called the Acceptance of the Judgment. Near the beginning, it says:

*Who can say to Him, what have You done?*

The tradition says that it is our part to accept. But, it also says God has a part, too. We have our obligation. He has His. The prayer goes on:

*Righteous are you, Hashem. In your hand is the safekeeping of all spirits. Chalilah - it would be sacrilegious of you - to erase our memory.*

While we are alive, we cannot forget. We will not forget. We should not forget. Oh God, we pray, see to it that we do not forget those who came before us, and that we are not forgotten, not now, not soon, not ever.

Leon Wiseltier derides the American idea of closure. “What a ludicrous notion of

emotional efficiency,” he says. And then he continues, “Americans ... [seem to] believe, that the past is past. They do not care to know that the past soaks the present like the light of a distant star. Things that are over do not end. They come inside us ... and they live on in the consciousness of individuals and communities.”

The 18th century English author, Jonathan Swift, wrote about an ideal community of perfectly rational beings. These beings did not fear death; did not suffer at dying; and did not mourn. As Swift well knew, real human beings are not perfectly rational. They feel as well as reason. They suffer. They mourn. It is, of course, as natural to die as to be born. That may be so, but it is an observation that offers no consolation, no help.

Does religion? Specifically, do Jewish mourning rituals like *Yiskor* or *Kaddish* offer consolation? What Abby and I found was that they do when we allow them to. Religion gives us the means to speak when we have no words and barely a voice to speak; it places us within a community and thus reduces, at least a little, the intensity of our feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Its rituals testify to the importance of what has happened to us: the importance of the unique person who is lost to us, and our own importance and uniqueness as human beings. The more often we use ritual to remember, the more those we lost remain alive with us.

While Abby and I were saying *Kaddish*, there was still another consolation we found important. Saying *Kaddish* structured our time. Obviously, the more we said it, the more structure our time had and the more constrained we were. But constraint can also be support. When I returned to work after sitting shiva for my father, one of my colleagues asked me how I could come back after only a week. She said that if one of her parents were to die, she would feel an immense emptiness. She would have, she said, a hard time finding purpose, a hard time knowing how to fill time. For people who hurt, the structures provided by work may not be enough.

For me, at the beginning, the most important thing about saying *Kaddish* was that it gives language to grief. Acquiring the language was hard. At *Shacharit* every morning, we recite the 30th psalm, which concludes, in part, with the phrase:

*That my soul might sing out to You and not be silent.*

What a wonderful statement, what an impossible statement.

Neither Abby nor I had ever been a regular attendee at any daily *minyan*. When we began to attend, therefore, we were speechless, songless, because the service was absolutely opaque to us. I thought that attendance at *Shabbat* and holiday services and eight years of *cheder* would have prepared me. I was not prepared. What I heard were brief periods of chanting, followed by what seemed to me interminable silences and, occasionally, some passages I knew. Yes, I recognized the *Shema*, the *Borchu*, the *Amidah*, the *Alenu*. But, at the beginning of my daily *minyan* going, they always came upon me unawares. Yes, kind people announced pages and even found the place for us. But, because we prayed with so many different congregations and used so many different *siddurim*, we were lost all the same for a long time.

When I taught composition at the SUNY Maritime College, I would tell my students that writing essays was a skill, like tennis or swimming or dancing. Everyone could do it, not equally well, to be sure, but everyone could do it. And everyone could improve his skills by hard work and practice. The real trick to learning to write, I told them, was to decide that the skill was worth acquiring and to be willing, as a consequence, to devote continuing effort to acquiring it.

Learning the language of prayer, the Hebrew itself and the ritual of reciting the prayers, was not easy for us. Learning to accept the content was also not easy for us. Both continue to take time to learn and time to reflect.

The prayer which is usually the mourner's central focus is the *Kaddish*. It exists in at least five different versions, only one of which is used as the Mourner's *Kaddish*. Every version is a prayer in praise of God. No version, except as custom has made it so, is a prayer for the dead.

*Yisgadol 'v yiskadash Shmei rabah, we begin.*

*Magnified and sanctified be the great Name of God in the world*

*He created as He willed.*

*May the Name of the Holy One, source of all blessing, be blessed.*

These are the words we said as so many others have said and which we will say



during this *Yiskor* service, the words that, over time, console by expressing the only truth that we know. We praise God, not for God's sake, but for our sake. In praising God, we assert the miracle of creation and the value of life, and we increase our faith.

In Chaim Grade's story of two Holocaust survivors, the story called, "The Quarrel," one of the survivors, despite his losses, chose to live a life of faith. He became a rabbi and teacher. The other, because of his losses, became an agnostic, a poet of the world as he had experienced it, a grotesque and horrible world, almost beyond telling. He could not love again; he could not find God again. Although he was physically alive, he was, in fact, another of the dead.

When we joined a congregation to say *Kaddish*, to recite the words that helped us, the hurt did not go away. For those who are angry at such a time, the anger is not likely to go away. Again from Leon Wieseltier: "Anger is not apostasy. Quite the contrary. It is another way of acknowledging God's responsibility for the world."

Every time we said *Kaddish*, every time we used the language of faith, we asserted that we understood that this is God's world, not our world, in spite of the fact that there were times that we really didn't understand that this was so. After a while, we were no longer speechless, but we were still often at a loss. Just as prayer requires work, faith requires work, too.

The way we chose to do the work that faith requires was to participate as much as we could in the community of believers. This is Wieseltier's description of how he did just that. "I rise in the dark .... there are heavy rains. I arrive in the middle of one of the Medieval poems. It is hard for me to see these pages as anything but literature. Yet the fervor in the room is real. I am in a gathering of genuinely religious people. They are here because they believe. And I am here because they believe."

Our tradition says that we say *Kaddish* to lighten the burden of punishment that the souls of the dead must endure in the other world. That was not the reason Abby and I said *Kaddish*. We did not think and do not think that our parents' lives were such that we needed to make an atonement for them. We said *Kaddish* because we came to believe, as the 34th psalm declares, that "the Lord is close to the broken hearted," and because we came to believe also that we find comfort from what we give to each other.



## Prayers of Praise

Hillcrest Jewish Center, Succoth 2008

I'm going to talk to you, today, about why so many prayers in our service are prayers in praise of God.

When I was younger, I did not care much about what prayers said. I entered the synagogue as a way of identifying myself with the Jewish community around me; and with the Jewish community that has existed for thousands of years; and with the members of my own family.

What I had to say to God in prayer could be summed up in a short phrase: *Hineni*. Here I am.

As a child, I learned Hebrew and became familiar with the general structure of the synagogue service. I learned enough to be a participant, and I responded emotionally, both as a child and as an adult, to the emotions expressed by other participants and to the emotions encouraged by the familiar melodies. I was a part of the scene. I came to be part of the scene, not to think about what I was doing or saying. In those parts of the prayer service in which we speak to God, I was not actually saying anything.

There is, of course, besides the prayers, another part of the service, the Bible readings, in which we do not speak. We listen to God talk to us and respond by trying to understand what we hear. I have always read the week's Bible portions in English.

After the deaths of my parents and parents-in-law, I began coming to prayer services more often than I did when I was younger; the prayers became more familiar to me; and gradually I began to try to understand what I was saying. What, after all, was the meaning of what I recited so often? The introductions to some *siddurim* stress the importance of the worshipper knowing the meaning of the prayers. So, when I was not at a service, and, eventually, even when I was, I began to read the prayers, this time as I read the Bible, in English.

My first thought about prayer was that, when we pray, we ask for something. When

all is going well, we ask for life and health for our families and ourselves and for good things to enjoy. In this season of repentance, forgiveness is also part of our list of requests. When we are in pain or despair, we ask for help. But as soon as we look at our prayer service thoughtfully, we discover that a great portion of it is devoted, not to requests, but to blessing and praising God.

Each Sabbath, this congregation says that we have come into being to praise, to labor and to love. First, to praise.

Every morning, our service begins with a series of statements praising God. Every service of the day includes prayers of praise or blessing: the *Ashrei*, the *Alenu*, the *Kedushah* and, of course, the *Kaddish*. Each holiday, we are privileged to say the *Hallel* prayer. *Hallel* means praise. The prayer is composed of psalms of praise. Someone once asked me why God needed so much praise. The answer, of course, is that God doesn't need our prayers of praise at all. We do.

We need them to help bring us closer to God. We need them to help us to understand what actions and qualities are worthy of praise, and we need them to help us to understand our place in God's world.

A traditional Jewish answer to the question "Why do we praise God?" is that praise brings us closer to God because praise leads to love. Every morning and every evening, we read the commandment to love God with all our heart, with every spiritual resource available to us. *V'ahavta es Adonai elochecha b'chol l'vavcha u v'chol nafsh'cha u v'chol m'odecha*. The expression of love can help to create a feeling of love. When a parent expresses love for a child, the parent's ability to love - to experience love, to give love, to receive love - is increased. When we praise God, we make ourselves more able to experience what the *Ahavta* prayer asks of us.

We also enhance our sensitivity to the presence of the Divine, and we are meant to find happiness and joy in doing so. Judaism is not just a set of rules and customs, it is also a set of feelings, of emotional experiences. When we fulfill the duty to praise, we are meant to be made happy by fulfilling it.

*Happy is the people who dwell in Thy house.  
They shall forever praise thee.*

Happy, not just dutiful. We praise to increase the possibility of our own happiness, not God's. What God has commanded us to do is for our sake, not his.

Praising God is also learning about God and the world He created. We learn not to take the world for granted. We learn that God is the source of all the ordinary things in our lives. We praise God for the food we eat, the water we drink, for the alternation of sunlight and darkness, for our ability to be conscious of Him. Partly such praise is an expression of gratitude, of love. Partly it is a lesson. We are being taught that this is God's world, made as He chose it to be made. The earth as we find it, ourselves and all life, are not just accidents. Many modern scientists argue that both we and our environment are no more than the actualization of one possibility of existence. More simply, it all just happened this way, by chance. It might well have happened another way, by chance. After the *Borchu*, the opening prayer of the evening service reads:

*Praised are you Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Your word bringing the evening dusk. You open with wisdom the gates of dawn, design the day with wondrous skill ... according to Your will.*

Our prayers of praise teach us to believe that the world and our lives didn't just happen by chance. In praising God, we are asked to try to discover anew that this is His world, all of it, and that we have a special place in it.

When I was only making the scene in *shul* and, often, even now, I arrived too late to hear chanted one of the most beautiful poems of praise in our liturgy, the introductory blessing of the *P'sukei D'Zimra*. *Baruch she amar*:

*Praised is God whose word created the world*  
 ....  
*Revere the One whose mercy envelops the world*  
*Adored is God whose kindness embraces all creatures*  
 ....  
*Celebrate the One who redeems and rescues.*  
*Praised is God's name.*

What is to be revered: mercy.

What is to be adored: kindness.

What is to be celebrated: rescue and redemption of those who need it.

Who is to be praised? God.

In praising, we learn what we should value in our lives: mercy; kindness; the rescue of those who need our help; and the ability to praise something other than ourselves.

Many prayers of praise deal primarily with God's power. In these prayers we are being taught a lesson in humility. It is God who rules the universe, not we. At the beginning of the *Maariv* service, we state clearly, "Praised are you Adonai our God who rules the universe." In psalm 19, we are told:

*The sky proclaims God's handiwork*

*Day after day the word goes forth:*

*Night after night the story is told*

*Soundless the speech, voiceless the talk,*

*Yet the tale is echoed throughout the world.*

God's power is evident, not only in the distant heavens, but also in our immediate environment. Lightening, wind, earthquake, and flood are His too. And so, to an extent, is history, human history.

*Adonai ish milchamah.* The Lord is a warrior. He delivered our ancestors from Egyptian slavery. He inspired us to victory in ancient times, and, if we choose to think so, in modern times, as well. Those who are inspired by Him have created nations.

Over the centuries, it is the powerful God, the Master of Knowledge and Nature, not God, the Master of Goodness and Mercy, who has most excited the human imagination. And it is because we have so much envied God's power that we most need prayers of praise.

The very first story about human beings recorded by our Bible, the story of Adam and Eve, deals directly with the human desire to obtain God's power over knowledge. The serpent induces Eve to break God's commandment to leave the fruit of the tree of knowledge uneaten by proposing to her a positive advantage for eating it: "As soon as you eat it," says the serpent, "you will be like divine beings." More simply, you will be like God.

And just in case we skimmed over the story of the temptation of Eve and didn't notice why she was disobedient, a few pages farther on, the Bible records the account of the tower built in Babel by Adam and Eve's descendants. The tower was intended to reach to heaven itself. And "the Lord came down to look at the city and the tower that man had built and the Lord said, 'If ... this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.'" So God scattered the builders over the face of the earth and made it difficult for them to cooperate with each other further. Human competition with God for His power is not only a matter of record in Bible stories. One of the enduring legends of Western civilization is the story of Faust, and one of its first great versions was created by the English playwright, Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe's play is the story of a man who sold his soul to the devil to gain power over nature. And what that meant to Faust is summed up in two lines that he speaks to himself - and to us, the audience.

*A sound magician is a mighty god:*

*Faustus try thy brains to gain a deity....*

More simply, use brains, intelligence, to make yourself into God.

Faust understood that what he asked from the devil was the power to do magic. It was magic that would enable him to control the world. Today, we call magic technology and science. The magic that Faust performed is commonplace today. He obtained grapes in winter. He called it magic. We call it airfreight. He could call music from the air. We call it using an iPod.

But there is magic that we do or aspire to do that would have made Faust pale with both envy and fear. We seek to be masters of both life and death, to treat our bodies as if they were elaborate machines to be governed as we wish. We strive to know and manipulate the genes that turn life on and off. We talk casually about the conquest of diseases as if we were fighting wars, which, in fact, have no end any more than diseases do. We live as a part of nature. Microorganisms also live as a part of nature. As opposed to thinking of ourselves as masters and conquerors, we will have to learn to live with all of nature, not as conquerors, but as co-inhabitants. God made them all. God is Master of death and life and deliverance, as we say whenever we chant the *Amidah*: "*Melech memit, u*

*mechayeh u matzmeach yeshuah.”*

About 10 years ago, an old high school classmate of mine, Steven Weinberg, Nobel laureate in physics, argued before Congress and in the pages of *The New York Times* that, if only the Congress would pony up another 10 or 12 billion for another particle accelerator, the last secrets of the physical universe would be revealed and the house of nature would be set in order. There would be nothing for future physicists to do but tidy up a few details of the two major physical theories of the last half century. He didn't get the money. Ten years later, of course, physicists are lamenting that their old theories don't describe the world as they find it and that they are unsure as to how to proceed with their investigations other than to tidy up those details that they can deal with and wait for a new theory. I do not laugh at their ignorance. Rather, I am awed by how much they actually know. But, I am amused by my old classmate's feeling, a feeling he still holds, that the power to master the world is almost within our grasp.

Job struggled with God. Not over God's power but His justice. He discovered, however, that the two were interrelated. Job is a man without flaw. He knows his sufferings to be unmerited, therefore he asks God for a trial in which he, Job, will stand as plaintiff and God as judge. Ultimately, God grants Job's wish and, in the course of the trial, replies to Job's question about His justice with questions of His own.

*Where were you, God asks Job, when I laid the earth's foundation?*

*Have you ever commanded the day to break?*

*Which path leads to where light dwells?*

*Who gave understanding to the mind?*

Then, God challenged Job directly:

*Look on everyone that is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked in their place.*

Then, says, God, “will I also confess to you that your own right hand can save you.” Job's only answer is a confession of human weakness: “I know,” he says, “that you can do



everything, that nothing you propose is impossible to you.”

Our praise of God’s power is an acknowledgement of our own weakness. Our strengths are not trivial, but they are not measurable against God’s. We praise God’s power, in part, as a way of helping ourselves to understand our appropriate place in His world.

A choral poem from an ancient Greek play, *Antigone*, can help us to understand our own texts. It begins:

*Numberless are the world’s wonders, but none  
More wonderful than man....  
[All the things that happen in the world are] taken in the net of man’s mind.  
Words also, and thought as rapid as air  
He fashions to good use; statecraft is his....  
From every wind  
He has made himself secure - from all but one;  
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.  
Oh clear intelligence, force beyond all measure....”*

And then the poem changes. No longer a celebration, but a warning:

*When the laws are kept, how proudly his city stands!  
When the laws are broken, what of his city then?*

The Greek poet asks his listeners and readers to temper their natural pride as human beings with an acknowledgement of the laws, human and divine, that should restrain and guide their actions. Our own tradition is similar. It is right that we should have a sense of our own powers. And it is necessary both that we temper our powers with the Divine law and that we should praise God as a sign of recognition that He has the ultimate power.

The prophet Micah speaks to us directly and forcefully on the issue of humility. What does the Lord require of us, he asks: only to do justice, to love mercy and kindness, and to walk “humbly” with our God. Despite our power, despite our will, we are to walk humbly and praise, not our own powers, but our creator’s.

What I have tried to argue to you today is that we should think of prayers of praise both as a traditional part of our prayer service and as a means of helping us to meet our own real needs. We should think of prayers of praise as a blessing that has been given us to help us to feel and express a desire for nearness to our creator; to learn what ideals of behavior we should most try to model our own behavior upon; and to help us to understand both the extent and the limits of human powers.

And I hope that when we chant the last line of the *Ashrei* together, that it will not be just another line that we chant, but that it will be for us, each time, a new song, a song that brings new blessings. *V'anachnu n'vorach Ya, mei Atah v'ad olam.* But we shall bless the Lord from this time for all time. *Hallelujah.*

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